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SUBJECT: THE SANDZAK: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS A "REHEARSAL" FOR LOCAL ELECTIONS

REF: 07 BELGRADE 1627

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) For leaders of Southwestern Serbia's predominantly Muslim Sandzak region, the results of the presidential election suggest that May's local elections will bring a new, more democratic local government. On January 20, local voters largely ignored Novi Pazar Mayor Suleman Ugljanin's endorsement of New Serbia's presidential candidate Velimir Ilic. Opposition leaders now believe these same voters may turn away from Ugljanin, himself, in the local elections.

Promoting a false mufti in order to incite a dispute between two local muslim religious leaders may also have weakened Ugljanin's authority. The public perceives Ugljanin as responsible for the rampant corruption and unrest in the Sandzak. Regional leaders continue to ask for international assistance in preparing for the May elections and in their efforts to strengthen media and civil society. End Summary

Ugljanin's Supporters Ignore Endorsement of Ilic;
Sandzak Votes for Tadic

2. (SBU) During a January 19-20 visit to the Sandzak, opposition leaders told emboffs that the first round of presidential elections were a "rehearsal" for May local elections. Despite Ugljanin's endorsement of Velimir Ilic, New Serbia party (NS) presidential candidate, Ilic finished third in the Sandzak region, behind Boris Tadic of the Democratic Party (DS) and Tomislav Nikolic (SRS). Ilic also finished third nationally. Local opposition leaders consider Ugljanin's inability to deliver more votes for his candidate of choice as an indication that Ugljanin's strength may be weakening and that he and his Party of Democratic Action (SDA) might lose local elections in May. Sandzak Democratic Party (SDP) spokesperson Mirsad Jusufovic told emboffs that Ugljanin's support for Ilic was a "big mistake," since most SDA supporters would vote for either Boris Tadic, whom the SDP, a DS coalition partner, had endorsed, or Cedomir Jovanovic of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), who was becoming increasingly popular among youth in the predominantly Muslim areas. Jusufovic conceded that Ugljanin's endorsement of Ilic was very weak, half hearted, and poorly done.

3. (SBU) In a January 20 meeting, Ugljanin's Chief of Staff, Fikret Niksic, told emboff that Ilic had done a lot for Novi Pazar ("such as paving new roads") and so it "made sense" for Ugljanin to endorse the NS candidate in the first round of elections. He left open the possibility that Ugljanin would throw his support behind Tadic for the second round.

Opposition and SDA Focused on Local Elections

4. (SBU) Representatives of Novi Pazar's new "Civic Initiative for Change" told emboffs that they were focused on the local elections. The group, comprised of the DS, SDP, Green Party, Sandzak

Alternative and Sandzak List, were combining efforts to encourage citizen participation and fair elections in the local elections. Representatives said they were responding to growing corruption on the local level, a concern that emboffs heard in all their meetings.

Niksic said the SDA was also choosing to focus on upcoming local elections. Niksic tried to discredit Ugljanin's main opponents, calling SDP leader Rasim Ljajic a "drug runner" and accusing Mufti Muamer Zukorlic of supporting violent extremists. Despite these accusations, he said Ugljanin would consider cooperating with the SDP if the SDP placed strongly in the May elections.

LDP Looking to Go It Alone in May

15. (SBU) Local leaders of the Liberal Democratic Party told emboffs they were pleased with the LDP's relatively strong first-round performance in the Sandzak, where LDP's candidate Cedomir Jovanovic placed fourth, surpassing his fifth-place nationwide performance. The LDP attracted about 15% of the vote in Sandzak (about 18,000 votes), compared to its 5.5% vote nationwide. As a result of this strong regional performance, local LDP leader Mehmed Zejnelagic told emboffs the LDP would run alone in local elections and would only consider coalitions with other democratic parties after the May election. Sandzak has one of the youngest populations in Serbia and the LDP specifically targeted this demographic in the presidential elections. Local NGO leaders told emboffs that the LDP was also able to attract votes from those who were disillusioned with both the SDA and SDP and those who were tired of politics as usual (read, Ugljanin) in the Sandzak.

Mufti Update: Zukorlic Confident, Zilkic Conciliatory

16. (SBU) Mufti Muamir Zukorlic continues to reconsolidate his position in the region after last year's flare-up over Ugljanin's

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attempt to install a false mufti, loyal to him. (reftel A). Zukorlic told emboff on January 19 that the security situation had improved and that the situation within the Islamic community was better, since "the attempt of the rebel (referring to Adem Zilkic) did not succeed." Zilkic, in contrast, told emboff that the security situation had worsened. Both Zukorlic and Zilkic withheld judgment on the recent January 19 appointment of a new chief of police, Dragan Terzic, saying that they would judge Terzic by his actions and his leadership, but expressed concern about a Serb occupying this position in a majority Muslim community. Zukorlic said he would support the new chief if "he is a good man, who does the right things." Both Zukorlic and Zilkic said the Terzic would need to tackle growing corruption in the region.

17. (SBU) Zilkic expressed his concern about Zukorlic's growing political influence against Ugljanin. Zilkic warned that the upcoming local elections could result in a growing fusion of religious and political control in Novi Pazar, something he said he would strongly oppose. Striking a more conciliatory tone, Zilkic said he wanted to bring Ugljanin and Ljaic together in order to foster peaceful cooperation. Zilkic said he had already "done 70% of the work" to make this happen, but said he now needed U.S. and Turkish help to bring the two sides together to talk. (He suggested Turkey because several thousand Bosniaks, Slavic Muslims, live in Turkey.)

Parties and NGOs Seeking International Assistance

18. (SBU) Political party and local NGO leaders requested international assistance in preparing for the May elections and for developing the region's civil society. Jusofovic requested assistance in training political party election observers and election board poll members in the lead up to the May elections. In addition, the local representative of the domestic polling organization CeSID asked for support for local media, which he said was either controlled or intimidated by Ugljanin. He said the media needed better training and resources in order for it to have an independent voice.

Comment

19. (SBU) Ilic's poor performance in the Sandzak on election day, after Ugljanin's weak endorsement, gave additional momentum to a fractured local opposition that is trying to stay united in the lead up to local elections on May 11. More than the current presidential elections, local elections will determine whether the citizens of Sandzak region have the will and strength to appropriately address their legitimate concerns regarding security and corruption. Ugljanin continues to enjoy the role of one of Serbia's most corrupt and heavy-handed local leaders. Having democratic forces prevail in Sandzak alone, during the upcoming municipal elections, would be a triumph for democracy and good governance. End Comment.

MUNTER